THERE ARE SEA GULLS ON OUR LAWN

D. L. and Betty Emblen

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THERE ARE SEA GULLS ON OUR LAWN

Poems by D. L. Emblen

Linoleum Block Prints by

Betty Emblen

NORTH SHORES PUBLISHING COMPANY

1337 Garnet Ave. San Diego 9, California

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D. L. Emblen & Betty Emblen

For STELLA MITCHELL,

who talks to Seagulls

Some of these poems and prints have previously

appeared in

THE NORTH SHORES SENTINEL

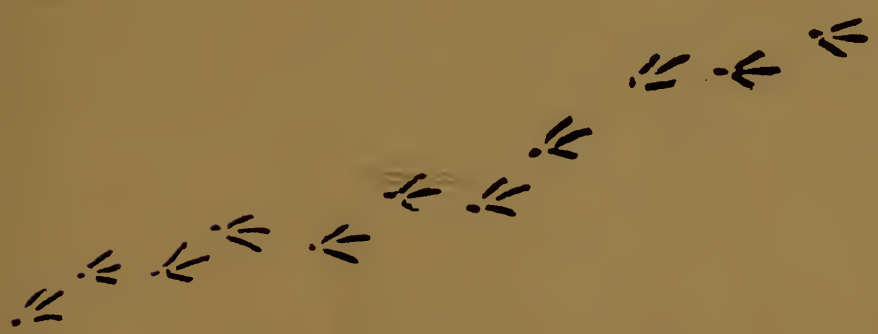
THE MISSION BEACH CALIFORNIAN

THE OCEAN BEACH NEWS

THE LA JOLLA LIGHT

SCENE

In the first of the morning,
after the night-long sighs of the sea's sweeping
the beach is a virgin place
where you walk slowly,
knowing that your's is the only trail of footmarks down that shallow, shining slope.
North and south the unmarked sand turns slowly with the curve of the continent,
dazzling the eyes with whiteness,
confounding the eyes with a miracle of cleanliness,
baffling the little man on the beach
who has carried with him all his life
the incredible litter of cities, roads, rooms and unwashed places.



BETWEEN TIMES

As the beach towns sleep,
lulled by the surf roar —
somehow more distinct at night, yet strangely subdued by dawn —
long after the mound of ruby and emerald and diamond lights of Ocean Beach
darkens like a pile of cooling coals,
a million vari-colored clams stir in the shallow bay,
and hold themselves open on taut muscles
a million other creatures move about
or hide
or silently die or give birth.
Complex mouths—snail mouths and anemone mouths—
open and close in the fluid atmosphere of their underwater places.
Crabs crawl from shell to shell;
minnows dart through tide pools like silver slivers, frightened by the glint of moonlight on the rocks.
A lonely heron rises from the flats,
scrapes his wings on tall marsh grass
and points his long ungainly form eastward, toward the mountains.

The people of the beach towns sleep,
night is only a time between dinner and breakfast.
But clams tighten their muscular vigil; crabs run faster; minnows seek even the moonlit patches for camouflage.
For the new tide flowing in upon them
brings a freight of food and fear

of creatures with multiple jaws, spears, claws, darts and
needle teeth,
of creatures with mouths and eyes
seeking food and watching for enemies in the new place
where they are being taken.
In every cove, on every long flat shelf of beach
in every weird rockpile of the littoral,
and out in the marshes, where the roots of grasses reach
clear down to salt water,
where shodows of lamp posts lie like solid logs against the
moon-white sand of yesterday's dredging;
under bridges, on the sides anf bottoms of channels, on
pilings, on the transoms of old rowboats,
the nameless ones huddle and scuffle, open and close, chew,
ingest, thresh the water with short feelers, retreat and
attack, dig holes in the bottom mud, drill holes in shells,
feel heat and lack of heat, and fearfully enter mystic
columns of cold water rising from the bay floor . . .

While people of the beach towns sleep
or lie there listening to the surf roar,
smiling to themselves, like children,
somehow secure in the myth of peaceful night-ness.

BEACHCOMBER

I keep finding blue-green bottle buoys,
bits of cork
and slats bearing oriental characters —
remnants of refuse dumped into the Kuro Siwo.
And some days there are many chunks of redwood limbs,
the shaggy bark worn away, the fibrous wood so steeped in sea water that it can hardly float
Whole logs come ashore
and broken spars,
and once a tumbleweed, fallen from the cliffs at Pt. Concepcion.
I never pick up shells anymore,
or old shoes
or splintered tuna poles
or sections of hawsers, mop handles, denim shirts or dead seals.
I keep looking for a thick-bottomed, hand-blown flask,
one that has bobbed about for eighty-five hundred miles or so,
with a note in it from a distressed maiden,
or maybe a little wine.

PROPHECY?

From the end of the pier
beachfires flare in a ragged line,
as though an army of barbarians had encamped
and was arming for a dawn attack.
The yellow cliffs behind mirror the flames
and dance with giant shadows,
distorted, leaping images,
bristling and heavy with weapons,
cavemen waiting on some bitter Spanish coast
for a tribe of fish-men to leap with hideous cries from the
surf.
And on the water,
flame reflections smear the sliding surface,
spreading orange stains,
like blood from carnage pits buried at the foot of the waves.

A SONG FOR PEACEFUL FOLK

Let us sing a song for peaceful folk,
for the unmurdering few.
They live on a flat piece down by the bay,
with a view of water,
their place grown around with berry vines and gangling
    tomato plants.
They spend their days on the sand
or hoeing the grainy California soil,
and their nights staring at flat white moons
that linger in their region.

The sea is at their ear,
the dust from the field sifts gently over the threshold of
    their open door,
they are kind to wandering dogs
and to small boys
who come in at noon, seeking oranges.

DRAGON CAVE

There is a steep place down below the end of Jenner Street
where centuries of waves have cut a sandstone cave.
Each night when lovers walk on the cliff-top,
when old people rest there,
when stray dogs pause and point their noses to the sunset sky,
the sea rolls in across the narrow beach
and fills the cave with thunder.

Children call it Dragon Cave,
they say the hollow booming sound
and the rapid crashing sound of waves doubling back upon
    themselves inside
are the alternate laughing and cursing of an unseen creature.
They say that one long evening,
with all the lovers and old people and stray dogs standing
    there,
a shower of starfish and broken abalone shells will fly from
    the cavern;
and that will be the creature preparing to come out.

EARLY APRIL, MISSION BEACH

Alone on the beach
the curlews follow in each receding wave,
rattling down the smooth incline of glistening sand,
spooning the soft slope with long, tube-like bills,
grey and brown and white, as the sand is grey and brown
    and white.
The gulls, sleepy and fat,
yet watching the curlews fish with a certain belligerance,
huddle together, colony-wise,
higher up where the dry sand is white as salt.
Their heads turn,
and the wind tufts their feathers,
and they hug the sun-warmed, wind-smoothed sand.
Seaweed tumbles in with the surf,
the whole brown writhing mass of it turning over
with each oncoming and retreating wave.
And settling again,
slick tentacles lashing a scruff of foam into the mesh of
    bulbs and leaves.
Single foliate strands stream fluidly in a hole of clear water,
where tiny shells, perfect as gems in a store window, roll
    slowly down the sides of slanting submarine slopes.
There are separate masses of kelp bobbing bulbs up, between
    waves,
like octopus,
like segments of men,
brown flesh, tatters of skin.

An old lady,
living in her small, wind-bound house through the off-season,
stares seaward across the beach,
shading her eyes with a wrinkled hand.
'Is that a body out there?"

GEOGRAPHER'S HOME, OCEAN BEACH

My house is where Point Loma's spreading root is joined to
the continent,
high on the cliff-side,
where you walk up thirty steps carved in sedimentary rock
to reach my door.
I have three windows . . .
one that overlooks Tahiti,
one whose curtains billow with rare fragrance straight from
old Shanghai,
and the north-turned one,
that funnels in the winds and spices of all Mission Beach and
Newport Avenue.

SUPPER ON THE BEACH

The flickering shadows of many myths
still dance, like candle flames, along the inner walls of
sea caves.
For there, by the light of dying beachfires,
where men and women of this country have come in the
evening since the discoverers,
the darkness booms
from the crash of unseen waves against the ends of subterranean passageways.
Babies cry
and lovers draw together, half in fun, half in unexplainable
fear.
And old people poke the fire and look about,
as though they were looking for lost children.
The darkness booms,
the darkness whistles suddenly
when small tatters of wind are drawn between eroded fissures
of the rock.
They tell of long lost treasure hidden there,
of guardian ghosts,
of bodies still floating about below, bumping softly from
side to side in the light-less caverns.
Even a seal barking from the outer rocks might be a monster.
And when the moon is gone,
when the only light is the ghostly trace of foam from breakers
on the beach,
when the wind-and-sea-carved cliffs reach down with
grotesque knobs and leaning limbs and eye holes,
when lower ledges glisten
and blobs of seaweed underfoot turn and yield,
the men and women who have come there since the
discoverers
have long since picked their way between the tide pools
and up the steep cliff-paths.

SOUVENIR

In an abalone shell
I see opalescent sounds and shapes,
sunsets, heron plumes, beach fires.
I see smoke compacted into panels of pearl,
gems from a hidden beach
and the swelling breast-line of that beach.
And when you dip it full in the surf
And hold it quietly in close-cupped hands until the sand settles,
I see your oval face,
solemn and sweet with the mystic meeting of woman and sea.

SWIMMING AT FALSE POINT

They tell me the cove behind False Point is no good for
swimming,
but I have dived into the surf there,
and my body swept through the richest of sea water.
An unaccountable fluid there, in waves rolling in, and in
thin silver sheets hissing up through the gravel beach;
more like broth than water,
strongly flavored and well mingled with golden broken kelp
leaves.
There is no sand on the shore,
it is a crescent mound of rounded stones the size of a dollar.
But from the soft dirt cliffs,
the stones of the cove, wet with high tide spray,
gleam and sparkle like piles of jewels.

ANY SATURDAY NIGHT

Sailors, four abreast, stride down the sea walk,
laughing and swaggering in their liberty blues,
striding their strange, exaggerated stride that is at once
belligerent and friendly,
whistling at the girls,
shouting at everyone . . .
girls, old ladies, suspicious men, small boys, dogs . . .
Keeping in step,
gathering a jubilant momentum,
keeping close together and taking up the whole path
so that every brief or complicated adventure
coming their way on the sea walk
must meet them face to face.

TRESPASSERS

There is a lawn on Feldspar Street
where at least a dozen seagulls come to rest each day.
An ordinary lawn,
no greener and no larger than those in front of other
    homes on Feldspar Street.
But here, in this one place, shortly after 2 p.m.
the sleek white birds convene,
to stand and stare at passersby,
to preen the smoother feathers at their breast,
to sleep,
to cry complainingly at grinning dogs
who come from several streets at 2:15.

LIVESTOCK

All manner of creeping, crawling, scuttling things
celebrate the morning in their own fashion.
Sow-bugs, antlered worms, moths and ants and sand-crickets
and pincher-armed termites
pause in the first fall of sunlight on their patch of ground,
and suck the clods for one last taste of moisture.
The dew-cooled surface dirt crumbles dry,
scorpions grope with rigid claws
and jade green centipedes tumble down the shiny shovel-
blade.
The brown earth moves with multitudes,
unknown hordes of barbarians and sophists,
that leave broad, silvered trails, narrow trenches, like wheel-
ruts; funnels and delta-fans of masticated soil.
This is the way the beach land grows,
changing hourly,
in every vacant lot, between the rows of every garden patch,
under the sod, in dust piles by the roadsides,
innumerable unnamed beings
turning soil in million mouthful lots,
inheriting the earth.

THE BATHERS

Landsmen crowd the shore like children at a carnival,
exclaiming,
pointing seaward,
shading their eyes with hands and books.
They bring their various lives along,
as dangling and cumbersome as folding deck chairs in their
arms,
as intimately varied as their costumes
and as basically the same.

Old ladies peer nearsightedly
and poke the softer sand with canes,
Brown and agile as seals, the younger folk run together
quickly;
smaller children disappear and reappear,
crying with sandy mouths.

Fathers shyly step across to the moving edge of surf,
and stand there, staring;
they look naked and cold in their white skins.
They turn and awkwardly advance upon the waves,
drawing back and hopping forward,
laughing excitedly,
as dogs meeting the sea for the first time.

THE GIRL WITH FOUNTAINS IN HER SHOES

I was walking down Emerald Street on a Sunday morning,
an early autumn day that fairly rang with the singing of meadowlarks in the weed fields.
She was standing in the center of a patch of fresh-plowed ground,
soaking it with a hose,
and trodding up and down in a pair of torn tennis shoes to mash the clods.
She was smiling like a child
and staring down at the rich brown mud
and humming to herself.

As I watched, she turned the hose full force upon her feet
and sang out in rare delight;
for streams gushed merrily from holes in the ends of her shoes.
"I've got spouts in my shoes!" she laughed.

LOW TIDE FROM CRYSTAL PIER

Flat as a dish, the sand hard-packed and shining
extends from shore to surf-edge,
further and wider with each half-hour of retreating tide,
until the bathers look like dolls bobbing about in the mounds
  and sheets of moving water.
The lifeguard stares and squints into the sun,
it is hard to tell a lump of kelp from a swimmer's head,
and there in the black-tarred piling of the pier,
many a small life might scream for help.
How would it sound, here in this warm, concave afternoon,
with the sea-air filled with the barking of dogs, shouting of
  children, squealing of girls, blare of a radio, and the long,
  continuous thunder of the sea?
Would a single frightened cry pierce this complex haze of sun
  and running bodies, splashes and flapping towels,
or would the lifeguard listen once
and put it down for the querulous voice of a seagull passing
  by?

GOLD IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

It's a poor man on the cliff
who cannot harvest gold and silver dreams by nightfall.
The joyous, many-cornered sounds of families
walking home from long warm days along the beach,
carrying inner-tubes and limp towels and remnants of Sunday papers,
shiny with sunburn,
smiling with the coolness of evening,
speak of laughter loosely gathered from the lips of many idle waves,
shells and bulbs of kelp,
wave-worn sticks and thick green gems of bottles
smoothed by countless tidal trips across the beach slope.

RESIDENT

An old man's cottage on the sand, down off Bacon Street,
has a yard of lawn and a pink geranium hedge.
They grow and bloom in a three-inch layer of reddish dirt
that he has hauled there
and spread out on his hands and knees.
He lives alone,
watching the years' high-water marks advance across the
beach,
chasing the seagulls out of his garden,
befriending the swimmers.

After each summer day,
after ten hours of sun-glare from the hot, white sand,
he sits in an old rocker on the porch and sips lemonade
and inhales the coolness of his green backyard
and watches the sun dissolve into amber fire and pearl grey
smoke along the horizon.

MEDANOS POINT

Between this tongue of sand
and sagging piers across the channel,
all things pass that enter Mission Bay,
all boats and rafts, dredges, driftwood, clots of shining
seaweed,
all fishes, shells and crabs,
every cube and mound of sea that rushes in
and spreads out shallowly between the points of land.
Twice each day the new tide carries still another unclaimed
freight of creatures,
the food of creatures and the seed of them
across the clean-swept bottom sand.
Every night the tide and wind work,
flooding in and scouring out,
and this has been going on for centuries.

If Medanos Point had eyes,
its low sand dunes would quiver constantly
with memories of strange and lovely forms of life,
of violent deaths and serene beginning made in mid-channel.
And wherever you might thump the sand,
it woud squirt a stream of moist sea images,
like a saturated bog.

LOVERS' LEAP

The crumbling lip of cliff —
sandy loam, white-flecked with bits of shells
held together loosely by a threadbare mat of wild grasses—
tips seaward brokenly,
sagging on a limestone hinge.
Nettles grow like lost and ragged flowers
on a sifting ledge
that trickles crumbs of earth deep into a concave vault of sea-mist.
Here is a resting place for gulls
who stand on wide-webbed feet
and listen solemnly to wind and trickling sand and hissing spray.
Here is a place for lovers' last long argument,
a narrow place for pacing,
a half-round stone for resting on,
a dark and grinning crevice, widening to draw the hot dry eyes,
and a yielding sod
that frightens tragic youths
who trod too near the edge.

NIGHT SOUNDS ON MISSION BAY

Night sounds from a place near water,
from a place where you can see many lights
and the brooding silhouette of a eucalytus tree,
turn one outward,
to the streets and fields and hillsides,
the marsh and cove and beach
that form a spreading pool.
With noisy breath stilled for but a moment in the throat,
you float into this shadow pond,
as gently and as wondrously as a new rowboat.
And there, without oars, drifting without effort or ambition,
you rise with the tide of a fluid night.

A seagull cry, the bark of a dog, the laughter of a girl
across the bay
slip through the mirrored surface without splashing;
a cigarette flipped curving from your side
is a meteor,
and a night plane, flashing red and green high overhead,
makes the roar of two planets
chasing eternity.

DEATH ON THE PIER

Flounders and sting-rays, spotted bass and crabs and lobsters,
all hauled struggling to the worn plank floor of the pier,
all stared at on the way up,
all dripping their last touch of sea-water,
as another creature might lose his life blood.
Glistening and pliant
of a strange, wet, dark-rubber flesh,
bristling about the mouth with vestiges of tusks and spears,
helpless and voice-less at the feet of the fishermen.
A cold steel knife drawn across their jaws,
or a sudden, crushing blow,
swung by their tails and thumped against the railing,
or strong man-fingers tearing away the hook.
Then laid away with other fish bodies in a gunny sack,
or left to flop reproachfully upon the splintery boards,
to gasp,
to lie silently at last,
with the round, impotent mouth open and the eyes glazed.
unheralded.

MT. SOLEDAD THE YOUNGER

Lonely mountain, blunt and brown,
steeped in the seeds of cactus and sage and wild sumac,
charred in the summer by a dozen grass fires,
green in the fall and creased by a hundred rain rivers.
Alone in a place of beaches and marsh-flats,
a frightened look about his crown of thorny brush,
a wild, uncertain look,
a mountain that grows no trees,
a mountain that all but starts at the noise of its own gophers.

Soledad was frightened in its youth
by the diastrophic surge that broke its infant centuries of river-silt growth
and hoisted it five hundred feet above the coast of La Jolla.
Now, in these times, in the age when other mountains are becomingly gnarled,
Soledad is blunt and brown as an adolescent Californian.
Soledad tries to hold its sandy sides together with burrs and thickets of milkweed
and makes much of a few stringy eucalytus trees.
While the beaches down below,
and the wide, pellucid bay
smile in the sun,
hug their own low borders
and watch the young mountain swell and shrivel with the seasons.

HOUR FOR DECISION

In his own half-hour on the pier
each man looks upon the sea's green back with his own eyes,
seeing knotted seaweed snarls
or, leaning harder on the rail,
streaming strands of mermaid hair;
foam spittle,
or trains of old white lace
flowing back from the heads of breakers;
glints of light, like glass splinters whirling in a drain,
or wriggling sea-sperm
writhing toward the loose and fecund sand of many beaches.

Each man quiets his own loneliness,
and shades his own eyes,
smiling or snarling,
while tons of hissing spray feed mussels on the pilings,
colonies of tiny fish race wildly through the waves
and dying suns glow briefly,
like old dreams, in the spreading ocean well.

RELIC

A broken concrete piling
leaning like a whitened spar in the surf,
pitted and worn,
throttled in snarls of kelp,
tilted further and further with each suck of undertow.

From the tide mark, from flat on the sand as a resting gull
would see it,
the piling points like a blunt, monumental finger
to that place in the western sky where the first red star
appears.
From the window of the aging red-board house on the walk
it is as thick as a pencil stub.
From the churning wash of sand and water at its base,
judging by the cautious touch of small creatures,
the piling looms as a strange old continent on a strange axis.

THE LOST FLEET OF CARMEL POINT

Into the red-brown sunset sea
a host of eucalyptus leaves set sail,
all curled like sultans' shoes
and bearing thick gold loads of pollen dust.
Beneath their brittle stems
a horde of minnows swam,
like schools of porpoise past a crowd of green sampans.
Beyond the point, beyond the old pavilion,
ripples raced in grinning circles from the other shore,
shaking the fleet,
dumping untallied cargoes into unmarked deeps,
scattering the empty hulls into a dozen criss-cross courses.

RESIDUE

All forms of life
serge in upon the cavern of the cliff,
fish and spawn of fish,
bodies of birds and seals and fishermen,
twigs and pieces of broken ships, leaves, fibers, fabrics—
propelled by tides and moons and strange quick jets of fear
    and hunger.
Seaweed gathers at the cave's round lip,
sifting the tide as a whale's mouth sifts the tide,
clutching with a thousand shiny tentacles,
winnowing with a mass of yellow leaves,
And yet the most translucent shells
are found inside, washed up high and delicately placed
    upon the gravel bench,
the bluest, smoothest stones are there,
and the whitest bones.

FIRST OF AUGUST, MISSION BAY

From a window on the bay
I watch the sullen afternoon drag dust and drowsy hours down
the street.
Liveliness is dead in me,
stilled and sun-streaked like a moth caught between screen
and window.
The clock ticks on, without decision.

Then a sailboat turns in the sun,
like a tail-less kite in a jade sky,
and the sudden whiteness of that wind-filled canvas
strikes me with a splash,
a rousing shout,
like the clean cold shock of plunging headlong into foaming
surf.

THE LADY ROSE

The Lady Rose, built for a millionaire's wife who couldn't
    sleep ashore,
drifted sleepily about the bay
and gleamed in the sun
and turned deliberately on her hawsers,
like a sun-dial's shadow swinging slowly with the sun.
Many coats of paint
and many years of wavelets lapping at her blunted bow
mellowed the Lady Rose
and her owners.

This might have been eternity for the gently rocking Lady
    Rose.

But cast ashore in the midnight of an autumn storm
that tore down lines and stove in sections of the seawall
and undermined the further pilings of the pier,
the Lady Rose dug deep into the beach, smashing her end-
    timbers.
A crew of men came out
and stood around her in the white exhausted morning,
poking her thick plank sides
and feeling places where steel cables sawed deep trenches in
    her deck.
They beached her for all time
and hauled her to a vacant lot across the boulevard,
mooring the faded Lady Rose at a genial angle in the weeds.

And so her final cruise began,
with a housewife at the helm
and a gang of children screaming on her after deck,
with a level lawn that spread about her like the water in

a calm anchorage,
with rooms and roofs added topside
and an unaccustomed clutter of plumbing down below.

So she plows through years and fogs
and unmoving areas of sun that peel her paint,
the smoothest riding craft along the coast
in the wildest storms.
On quiet nights, the neighbors say,
they hear a wistful whistle from the Lady Rose,
blowing for the right-of-way
at traffic running by in Mission Boulevard.

CHANGE OF TIDE AT MISSION BEACH BRIDGE

The last small wave is hurried through,
drawn splashing and struggling in between the walls of the channel,
snatched from the whole blue sea
and tossed without ceremony upon the shallow, widening bay.
And then the one in charge of tides, of storms, of lonely sand spits and lost seagulls
blows a soothing breath
or smiles commandingly
or takes the palms of his hands and presses the water out flat
and holds it there, with both arms around,
as one might hold a platter of cream
until there is no fear of spilling any of it.
The green bay water is so still
that a feather from a mud hen's wing makes circles,
as a stone makes circles in a mountain lake.

PLACE WITH A VIEW

From a house on upper Saratoga Street
you can see coastwise all the way from Spaulding Park to
    Navy sheds along False Point,
all of the bays and inlets and estuaries—
guitar shapes and kidney shapes—
all of the stucco beach towns,
spreading out like the house of a growing family,
littering the shore and half the slope of Soledad.

At night the highways run along at their own diagonals,
curving like bracelets,
coming together, gleaming with moving lights,
like capsules thronging in luminous arteries.
At noon the sun flares upon the curving surfaces of bay

like floodlights on a plate glass window pane.

At dawn you hear the singing of vitamins tumbling in the
    new air
and the noise of mockingbirds in a pepper tree.

TURNING OF A SEASON

The first rain comes in September,
sifting down in miniature drops,
a mist-like rain
that is not quite seen.
It is known by colors deepening along the street—
dust into brown soil,
weeds into plants with pea-green leaves,
faded boards into orange squares and cubes and rectangles,,
darkening patches on the roofs.
By noon the thread-bare summer haze
that has hung like a dusty cobweb across the sun for many weeks
is gone,
torn and shredded away by a ton of water falling in a million weight-less particles,
dissolved in a slow spray
that washes seeds and seed-husks, and pieces of sand,
slivers, burrs, shattered pods and rotted leaves
into the open ground.
And all about the place, from every yard and vacant lot,
the rising perfume of wet earth brings the folks to their windows,
The smell of fall is a quiet and wonderful surprise,
like the smell of night-blooming jasmine floating through the house.

MY MOTHER-IN-LAW TALKS TO SEAGULLS

Mother says there are ledges full of gold just off shore,
that there are rafts of teakwood, loaded with jade,
floating around between sea lanes.
She says that when two ocean currents meet no ship
can sail there,
that death and birth are hard to tell apart in the sea
off-shore

Each noon she shares a sandwich with seagulls on the lawn;
she tells them of New Mexico,
of saline flats where ancient arrowheads litter the
cracking earth like shells on a beach,
of Indian dances and cotton crops and moonlight through
tall ash trees arched across the irrigation ditches.
The seagulls nod and walk about
and recall the albatross who couldn't fly,
or the whale who smiled
or some of the milder mysteries of the depths and shallows
of mid-sea.

Mother says that stranger things than phosphorescence
happen in the wake of ships,
that greater treasures than small schools of silver smelt
are found in the eddies around the pilings of a pier,
that in the scruff of foam about each breaking wave
pearls are born.

ART SCHOOL ON LA JOLLA BOULEVARD

Each young hand turns upon the pivot of a brush,
moves nervously,
hangs back
or slashes deep into the oblong space of landscape,
grouping as each eye and understanding gropes
for truth and splendor,
for truth and squalor in the bluish haze of morning.
Each one seeking something in a scene that asks nothing
    from anyone.

. . . faded red tile roofs, a scattered run of cars below,
    one by one,
a row of ragged palms, like turkey-necks against a dull green
    mass of sea,
the cliff edge and the sea itself,
clouds,
and blurred horizons,
and telephone wires paralleling horizons.

TRAIN TIME

When wind veers off the sandstone cliffs
and rattles the dry brown leaves of ancient palms above the
    cove,
a ragged crowd of sparrows
shrills complaint for every summer guest,
who sees the sun lost,
the spray-filled fog as his new host
and the long cool evening walks along the cliff-tops
replaced by hasty drives behind a spattered windshield.

SPECIMAN

There are many wondrous fish
that flash their green and yellow sides below Seal Rock,
fish with luminescent eyes,
with fern-like fins and fins with spines,
fish with nostrils close together, bulbous eyes and cordate teeth,
fish that are seen only by lantern
and others that are never seen, only the soft circle splashes of their air-gulping,
creatures with foot-less legs,
streamer legs,
bundles of arms and feelers,
shovel forms in shining sheaths,
sword forms and living things that drift like water-swollen leaves.
And when the tide draws back,
leaving cluttered rock alive with moving pods and shells and hulks, anemones and armored chitons grouping in the cracks, snails and pink transparent bubbles of creatures,
it shows a lower shelf of clams and pectins and mussels,
limpet cones and giant abalone shells, isopods and lobster claws.
But all across this seething sea-jungle of kelp and rock, flushing and receding wave, cracks and caves and tide-pools, shreds of fog and germinating sunlight,
there is no stranger thing than one old man
who floats his long brown body on a paddle board
and face down sculls diagonally across the waves
with hands enclosed in bright green wide-webbed gloves.

OLD MAN PETERBAUGH

In all the coves, from Bird Rock to the old Scripps pier,
there is no bather or surf rider or diver for abalone
who laughs as much
or who greets the sea with half the joy of old man Peterbaugh.
He teaches boys and girls to swim,
flailing long thin arms about like pelican wings;
he floats spread-eagled on his back;
he swims between the waves, using a shallow side-stroke;
he doubles up to rest,
his head and feet above the surface,
and his bony hands paddling rapidly,
turning him around and around, as on a spindle.
And when he's done, he slowly swims ashore,
rising from the clear green water of the cove—
the sea running in torrents from his wrinkled hide,
wavelets foaming at his knees,
seagulls crying from the rocks—
as an old man of the sea might suddenly emerge.

MARINORAMA

Fishboats troll from Sunset Cliffs to reefs beyond La Jolla Bay,
leaning with the northwest wind,
lurching in the shallow troughs,
slewing on the southward run, with heavy seas abeam.
People on the cliffs squint and shade their eyes
to watch the twelve-foot jig boats take the swells.
They exclaim and stare and lean forward in the wind of their own hillsides,
loving the clean white bow-stroke deep across the humping backs of the waves,
waving their heads in time with brown stick masts waving back and forth,
wishing they themselves might be fishermen
and feel the touch of sea.

The fishermen wipe salt spray from their eyes,
and scream profanely to the wind,
cursing wind and tangled lines, plunging hull, crosswise waves, broken hooks, diesel smell, the everlasting stink of fish, the bloody deck, the slipping boots and slimy handholds,
and wish to God they were ashore,
standing with the landsmen on the cliff,
wishing they were fishermen.

FASCINATION AFTER DEATH SYMBOLS

Why do I return each time to this sand coast,
where figures of manta rays are hand-carved deep into
the rocks
and brittle lobster claws form necklaces along the beach?

What is there to be sought in waves and coves and slipping
cliffs,
and miles of hard-packed sand as smooth as any highway?

Each night upon the point I see the sun disintegrate,
a slowly spreading pain of yellow sky and inflamed sea;
each day, when foreheads of the rocks cast shadows full across
the beach,
I stare upon white boulders buried in the cliff,
like skulls imbedded in a catacomb.
And when I walk from shore to surf,
beneath the eyes of hooded cormorants,
with every step I crush the skeletal remains of whole colonies
of sea creatures.

THE FOOT OF CHALCEDONY STREET AND THE END OF THE WORLD

In the Latter Year,
when long thin spirals of smoky time
trail upward from a desert of remnant artifacts,
our beach will be a grinning, lip-less mouth
for the skull of a continent.
The waves will whisper in and out,
hollowly,
as Mojave winds flow in and out the sockets of a rabbit skull.

The birds will have their beach again,
will form along the lacy lines of tiny skeletons and crusted
    bits of seaweed that mark the circumference of each new
    effort of the sea,
and bloated carcasses of seals
may lie there stinking
as long as they want.

PLAYBOY

A small dog on the beach,
the long, deserted beach of Neptune Place,
where thick flat rocks lie buried in the sand,
tossed ashore, abandoned sculpture from an unknown island.
The wind has driven bathers from the surf, from the sand
    bank, from the porches of homes along the street,
and the small dog runs in perfect freedom down the hard-
    packed sand.
He chases seagulls and curlews and sandpipers,
barking and grinning,
showing off his vibrant, frantic body to the waves,
wheeling from one shrill-voiced bird to another,
like a man with many loves.

BILL'S PIER

Bill's pier stands on wormy cedar pilings,
bluntly out from the slight smooth curve of beach,
a shifting web of planks,a lonely place
as a raft would be lonely floating in the space between the
    crescent horns of a moon.
Looking back at night,
the cubic patterns of lighted streets
spread out across the soft black mounds of the continent.
It is a place where you stand open-coated and open-faced,
savoring and nodding to the mystic monologue of sea.

A few dim lights spray saffron splashes on old railings . . .
the surf seethes violently about each worn piling.
And at night like this,
from the end of Bill's pier
you feel the weight and towering size of that coming cloud
    bank,
looming high and black,
light-edged,
thick as a slanting mountain.
The waves hump high beneath the old plank floor,
following each other in like porpoises,
the wind's at hand;
you look up to the soft, smoke-like wall of cloud,
knowing it is as long as the beach,
as long as the whole West Coast, perhaps,
A single star shines for an instant,
caught trembling and lucent in the furled mesh of fog
like a silver minnow.

MORNING AT THE BAIT BARGE

The sea comes in by devious paths,
as an old river wandering through a marsh and delta country;
reaches in with rounded tongues and narrow, level-seeking
    arms,
fondling the shaggy pilings,
gently lifting floats and the fleet of rowboats,
slowly feeling the feet of hills,
exploring the soft silt bay bottom foot by foot
as each new tide covers the tracks of seabirds.

The morning air flows down, pouring in a softly scented
    breath from the mouth of Mission Valley,
widening to a thinner tide upon a thick green marsh-grass
    meadow,
carrying the sounds of bird calls and dog voices and muffled
    city noise, like a distant humming.

Here the sea and valley breath
converge within an inlet full of razor clams,
and are greeted by a whistle from the dredge,
a rush of godwit wings,
a flurry of small flounders
and a stirring of seaweed streamers hanging from the bridge
    highwater mark.

MITCHELL'S LANDING

This is one of many places in the marsh
where man has been
and gone,
leaving a leaning post, a splintered bamboo pole ,a broken bucket,
a sagging plank that crossed the slough.
Here is where he sat and watched the minnows dart from one reed jungle to the next,
where lumbering blue herons flapped a yard above his head,
where he paused within the limp-rag flopping sound of wavelets lapping on the shore
to listen to the tick-tick-tick of his own consciousness.

FOOT OF GRAND AVENUE

Our street emerges from the vast expanse of continent,
somewhere east of Quincy Street,
from mountain pass or flat plateau or narrow dried-up river-
bed that leads to Texas and the Dakotas and Philadelphia,
from rain-bright highways of the middle States, rutted Georgia
roads, from shining, twin-streaked railroad tracks,
from a never-never land of politics
and visions,
from a people too far apart to know each other ,and living too
close together for tolerance.

Our street has to be as wide as three normal streets
with the traffic it bears,
of slow-moving memories,
of racing, honking ambitions that rely upon their horns rather
than their brakes for safety,
of huge pedestrian throngs of daily and nocturnal images,
of strange, disrupting beasts of fantasy and heritage that keep
trotting diagonally across the way.

The dust of all these carriages and six-ply tires,
those hooves and horns and timber-ends dragging in the dirt,
this animated history,
descends upon our house in soft protective layers,
like the fragile moss that sheathes grey boulders from the
surf-wash.

On warmer afternoons,
when the burden of Grand Avenue stirs the fundamental dust
to clouds of intangible commotion,
we walk bare-footed to the beach,

and we walk straight down the middle of the road,
regardless of the houses and half-houses passing by on wheels,
or the loud vehicular roar of contemporary fear.

At the foot of Grand,
where the sun has warmed the sand all morning
and the summer wind blows freshly from the surf,
we lie with our heads together on one towel,
turned seaward.
This feeling of warmth above and below,
of moving air, filled with pastel sounds,
of the sea in front and the great absorbent blanket of sand
about us,
is a feeling of infinity,
where space and time are a pair of sand-fleas
hopping in the miniature dunes we sweep aside or build with
our fingers.

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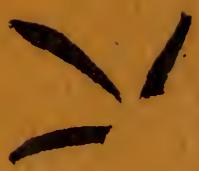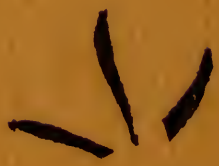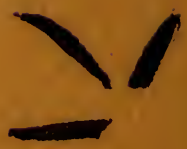
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